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ABSTRACT

The Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) is a statewide program designed to ensure that all students attending public colleges and universities have the basic reading, mathematics, and writing skills necessary to perform effectively at the college level. All entering first-time freshmen are required to take the TASP test, which has a basic skills focus and a "rising junior" component, and to complete remedial course work if they do not pass all sections of the test. Students cannot obtain a baccalaureate degree nor graduate from a community college without passing the TASP. Two major groups are exempt from the testing requirement: anyone who had taken at least one college-level course prior to August 31, 1989, and those enrolled in a vocational-technical program requiring less than nine hours of general education. Though the TASP test was developed by National Evaluation Systems of Massachusetts, Texas's 49 community college districts secured several major concessions with respect to the TASP test and related policies, including the development of two test forms, the reduction of test costs, and a refocusing of the test on basic skills rather than on "rising junior" assessment. The benefits of TASP include its diagnostic emphasis, the large number of people involved in test development, and mandatory remediation. Remaining problems include the state's failure to adequately reimburse the colleges for remedial education and possible bias against minority students. (JMC)

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Paper presented at a Summer Institute sponsored by the Community Consortium: The University of Michigan, The University of Toledo Michigan State University, and the Consortium for Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success (Chicago, IL, June 1989).

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Texas Academic Skills Program

by Dan Angel

Dan Angel is the president of Austin (Texas) Community College.

This was the text of a speech given at the Summer Institute co-sponsored by the Community College Consortium: The University of Michigan, The University of Toledo, Michigan State University and the Consortium for Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success held in Chicago in June 1989.

Today, my task is to share with you the new Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP). I'm going to try to take you through a series of events: First, a very quick look at the national circumstances that eased us into this scenario in Texas. Second, we'll take a look at the enabling legislation. Third, we'll walk you through the test and tell you what it means, what the pieces are, and who has to take it. Fourth, I'll cover what I consider to be the benefits of the program and some of the shortcomings. Let's begin with the national setting for the test. I'd say that all of us can clearly identify growing evidence and concern across the country regarding student performance that was initiated back in 1983 with "A Nation at Risk." Within a couple of years, the high school focus had switched to colleges because of a national concern with college attrition, adequate preparation, and a loss of social and economic opportunity for many.

The state of Texas hired National Evaluation Systems of Massachusetts to develop the test. NES will "conduct continual development, improvement, and modification of the Texas Basic Skills testing program until June 30, 1995." Before I get into further detail, I should share what my involvement with TASP has been for the last 18 months. I've been involved in six significant ways. I served as the chairman of the Texas Public Community and Junior College Association Oversight Committee; I presented TPC/JCA testimony before the Coordinating Board; I was involved in co-hosting a state-wide conference on TASP; I hosted a two-hour television show that was done throughout the state of Texas regarding TASP and its implementation; I chaired a faculty development committee on the expected shortages of reading teachers; and I was a member of the advisory committee that set the distribution formula for money. What is the TASP? Most definitions would go something like this. TASP is an instructional program that has a testing component. It is designed to ensure that all students attending public colleges and universities have the basic reading, mathematic, and writing skills necessary to perform effectively at the college level. If you don't pass all three sections of the test, you must take remedial education. That is different from the New Jersey system which offers assessment without mandatory follow through. In Texas you must take the test and you must take remediation until you pass that particular section of the test. Who takes the test?

Generally, all entering first-time freshman who are going to a public institution in Texas, more specifically, five groups are affected: 1) students enrolling in a college-level degree program, 2) people who are getting a certificate program that contains more than nine units of general education (defined in Texas via the Southern Educational Regional Board), 3) anyone transferring to Texas and enrolling in a public institution, 4) anyone entering an "upper division" institution,

and 5) people going into teacher education. Who is exempt? There are two major groups that are exempt from the taking test. One is the so-called "grandfather" group. This is the usual procedure when you try to make it as comfortable as possible to begin something new. We did that in an easy way in Texas. We said that anybody who takes one college-level course before August 31, 1989, is exempt from taking the test forever! Consequently we have a lot of students in summer school this year! At Austin Community College our typical summer school is about 10,000. This year we have over 12,000 students, and I'd be willing to wager that about half of our new students are there because they want to avoid TASP. As a matter of fact, when we were talking to high schools in the Austin area, we found that the most known fact of the new test was that you could avoid it by taking a class this summer. Even my son caught on to that and he's only in the 10th grade. The other major exemption has to do with programs that are "certificated." Many of the community college people had strong objections to vocational-technical students taking a test like this. Therefore a significant compromise was reached. If your program is vocational-technical and has less than nine hours of general education, you don't have to take TASP. When do you take the test? I've already said that students coming to college for the first time are going to have to take the test. But, of course, there are always exceptions to the general rule. Texans will have two choices: 1) you take the official form before you finish nine semester hours of college work, or 2) you take the unofficial campus form at your local institution before the conclusion of your 15th hour of semester work.

We said that anybody who takes one college-level course before August 31, 1989, is exempt from taking the test forever! Consequently, we have a lot of students in summer school this year!

What are the penalties? First, if you haven't taken the official version by either the 9th or 15th hour time limit, you are not allowed to take any further college-level courses. Second, if you fail any one of the three portions of the test, you must take remedial education and you have to be "continuously enrolled." Now that may be a credit course of one, two, or three hours or it might be a non-credit course. Whatever the case, you must be enrolled in some kind of continuous remedial education in the area of the test that you failed.

A third stringent penalty is that you can't graduate without it. You can't get a baccalaureate degree without passing this test; you cannot graduate from a community college without passing this test. So the penalties are severe. That's who, how, what, where, and when. Now let's talk about the test itself. If you are going to take this test, here's what you are going to be facing. First, you're looking at a four-hour time commitment. Next, there will be three areas of test content: reading, mathematics and writing. The reading section is composed of 36 multiple choice questions that test six separate skills. The math test is made up of 36 multiple choice questions that test ten separate skills. (Out of those ten components in the math section, only two deal with general math, the rest deal with algebra and geometry.) The writing area has 35 multiple choice questions and also has a 300 to 600 word writing sample.

Issues

In general, 70 is a passing score. That number has been very controversial in Texas. A lot of people in our state think that is too high, many others feel it's too low. Another controversial issue was how much the test costs. Originally, the test was going to cost $29 and that cost was very unpopular in community college ranks. Eventually, we were successful in getting it lowered to $24 for the official version. The unofficial version is a maximum of $3. (The actual fee is at the option of the local institution.) A third big issue was where and how frequently the test would be given. Eventually, it was decided that official tests would be given five times a year at about 100 locations.

First Test Experience

Headlines all across the state proclaimed: "81% Pass TASP." But the results were also deceiving.

The first time that TASP was given was on March 4. We were predicting that thousands of students would come out and take it, but only 8,000 students throughout the state materialized. The results on that first test seemed comforting. Headlines all across the state proclaimed: "81% Pass TASP." But the results were also deceiving. Of the 8,000 students who took the test, 75% were already college sophomores or juniors. Many others were high school honor students. Only six percent of the students who took the test said they intended to go to a community college. On June 10, the second test day, about 9,000 students took it. So far, the Coordinating Board has not released any information at all regarding that group. The other tests dates this year will be July 29, September 30, and November 18.

Test Development

During our development of TASP, we brought people in from other states to tell us what they were doing. Most of the discussion focused on Florida and New Jersey and our test is really a combination of what's happening in these two states. We have a basic skills (New Jersey) focus and a rising junior feature (Florida's focus).

Community College Influence

Texas' 49 community colleges were heavily involved in trying to secure major changes as the TASP test developed. It was hard for a while because there was no way to tell who was in charge. By June 1988 we had secured five major concessions.

1. The grandfather provision.

Our concern was that there would be so many people the first year who would have to take the test that we wouldn't have the money, the staff, or the time to deal with them. So we wanted it delayed somewhat or softened. Our other fear was that legislature was not going to come through with enough money to handle that volume of people and we were right on both counts. So the grandfather provision was very important to allow us to take a lucid beginning.

2) Two Test Forms

Let me tell you what our situation was back then. We had thousands of students who were going to come to our institutions. They were going to arrive without taking the test and the game plan was that we'd have the test results back in only six weeks. That time lag meant the information was useless for first semester placement. What were we going to do with students for a whole semester if we had them in the wrong courses? That made no sense at all. Finally, we came up with the two test forms.

3) Reduced Test Cost.

4) The 9 to 15 Rule.

It doesn't make sense to enroll students in remedial educational courses and test them before they have time to learn.

5) Refocus on Basic Skills

I honestly believe that the impetus for the Coordinating Board was the "rising junior" goal. The basic skills were kind of an afterthought.

Benefits

Does TASP have any benefits? I believe there are 12.

1) The diagnostic emphasis.
2) The huge number of people who were involved in developing the test.
3) TASP requires remediation, monitoring, and reporting.
4) TASP offers us a better opportunity for K-12 ties.
5) TASP pushes us toward an "all one system" look at education.
6) The program makes us responsive to the emerging demographic needs of our state.
7) The results will narrow the ability bands of students that we have in our classrooms.
8) The program will increase public confidence if students do well.
9) The testing effort should lead to less legislative intervention.
10) Retention rates will improve.
11) Our degrees will mean something.
12) Our students will be able to "cut it" when they go out into the world.

I believe these 12 things are very positive TASP outcomes and I have, therefore, been an advocate from the beginning. I have always been more interested in making sure it "got done right" than the fact that it was "going to be done." Unfortunately, a lot of people are still in that first category; they just wish it hadn't happened.

Remaining Problems

Now in addition to these benefits, I'd like to share with you my perspective of three significant problems that we still face.

1) The process of test development

I don't think $24 is a reasonable cost for community college students...

I believe the state of Texas probably did that wrong. Policy makers concluded they didn't have enough money to develop the test and hired a national firm to do it. That means that somebody else pays the amount of money for creation of the test, but it also means that our students will be paying more than they should. I don't think $24 is a reasonable cost for community college students to have to pay. And while students will be paying too much, the outside firm is going to make a bundle. I'm not against NES particularly, but I wonder if this was a wise state policy. I've concluded that if you charge $24 a test and you stretch this out over six years that NES stands to make somewhere between $20 and $40 million for creating the test. I think legislatively you might want to be able to look at something much more advantageous to your state and your students than that.

2) Money

Over the last two years in Texas (1988-89), about $40 million was spent by the state in reimbursing remedial education. The Commissioner's Office this year concluded that since numbers were probably going to double, they would seek double the funding from the legislature for the next two years. When we ended our session, the legislature had cut that number to $22.5 million. Institutionally, few of us were fully convinced that there would be enough in the first place.

Let me give you just one isolated case. Austin Community College had planned to spend about $450,000 in TASP expenditures in 1989-90. And we're going to get only $250,000. That means we're going to be subsidizing that program very heavily.

3) Test Bias

In our state, MALDEF (the Mexican American Legal Defense in Education Fund) has been very active in challenging the development of this test on five major counts: The importance of multiple criteria, enough money for remediation, the scientific accuracy of test scores, the impact on minority students, and the lack of lead time for developing remedial education courses. These MALDEF concerns are real and we must work diligently to correct any defects.

Summary

The testing issue is here to stay and educators are going to have to deal with that inevitability. I believe the state of Texas has taken a bold and aggressive step in trying to provide its students with the help they need to be successful. Commissioner Ashworth is fond of saying that "this is a test not to sort people out, but to sort people in." I support the decision to have TASP in Texas, both as a college president and as a former state legislator. Why? There are five compelling reasons:

1) There is an abundant supply of information that shows our students are not adequately prepared. I don't think that is deniable; I don't think any of us can sit there and say that isn't true. We have to come to grips with the fact that our students are unprepared.

2) The demographics of our nation should be a driving force that supports a state-wide testing program.

3) There is a strong economic need in terms of job preparation and world competition. All the information that I have seen indicates that people are going to need more skills in the future even for jobs that are not particularly high paying or high up the administrative ladder.

4) We need people in our democratic society who can function, not be functionally illiterate.

5) There is a purely humanitarian basis. The Texas TASP isn't quite the two-step...but it's the right rhythm and beat!

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